

# Tile Roofs of Alfred, NY

Susan Tunick

**A**t first glance, the town of Alfred resembles other rural settlements located in the Southern Tier of New York State. It is tucked into a secluded section of the Allegheny foothills, offers beautiful hillside vistas and includes traditional village centers similar to those in many nearby towns. But a second look at Alfred reveals a community different from its neighbors, for it is filled with terra-cotta tile roofs.

In all, more than 100 structures bear these distinctive orange-red roofs. They are powerful reminders of the terra-cotta tile industry that thrived in Alfred from 1889 to 1909. Two companies, the Alfred Clay Company and the Celadon Terra Cotta Company (which evolved into the renowned Ludowici-Celadon Company, still operating in Ohio today) transformed high-quality local raw materials into a wide variety of clay roofing tiles. Clay tiles are one of the most ornamental and distinctive roofing materials, offering a great range of shapes, colors, patterns, and textures. The unique aesthetic qualities of a clay tile roof help to make it a prominent feature in many historic structures.

These durable and fire-resistant tiles were also especially popular for roofing in the surrounding Alfred region, where village residents and farmers from outlying areas transported “factory seconds” to cover their buildings. A wide variety of residential and commercial structures were roofed or re-roofed with tile. Early-19th-century houses, churches, outbuildings, libraries, campus buildings, and even the few nearly extinct barns, carried rich patterns of the red tile.



The Conosera tile roof and ornamental finial were added to this 1830s commercial structure at 44 North Main Street in the late 1880s. Photo by Jay Barclay.

Alfred residents have long cherished their historic connection to the clay industry and have been actively involved in preserving the physical evidence of their past. In 1985, they successfully obtained a listing on the National Register of Historic Places for the sizable Alfred Village Historic District as well as for four individual landmark buildings. More recently, the Friends of Terra Cotta, the Alfred Historical Society, and the Baker's Bridge Association, have worked with residents on a Roof Tile Project which included a publication, *Tile Roofs of Alfred*, and a series of related activities.

Although tiles can last for centuries, the life span of a terra-cotta tile roof is estimated to be about 100 years. Since most of the Alfred roofs are reaching this venerable age, part of this Roof Tile Project included a survey of the existing historic roofs. All the roofs were documented with photographs, conditions reports, and written histories. A clear awareness of a roof's condition is the first step toward helping to preserve it. In today's world, where architectural conformity is the rule rather than the exception, it is hoped that Alfred will be able to retain its terra cotta architectural heritage for future generations to enjoy. It was with this goal in mind that *Tile Roofs of Alfred* was prepared and published. This booklet provides historical background on Alfred's terra cotta roof tile industry, an illustrated walking tour of Alfred, and information on roof tile manufacturing and installation.

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Susan Tunick is the president of the Friends of Terra Cotta, a national preservation organization, as well as an artist working in ceramic mosaics.

To order *Tile Roofs of Alfred*, send a check payable to FOTC for \$7.00 (includes postage) to Friends of Terra Cotta, c/o Tunick, 771 West End Avenue, 10E, New York, NY 10025; 212-932-1750.



A wagon load of roof tile packed in straw passing the Celadon Terra Cotta Company business office. Built in 1892, the building served as a catalog of the decorative tiles the company produced. Known today as the Terra Cotta Building, it was moved in 1974 to its current location on Main Street. Photo courtesy Alfred Historical Society.